DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 124 CS 501 816

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TITLE Therapeutic Interpersonal Behavior in the Crisis Situation: An Empirical Study of Coping Responses.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Berlin, Germany, May 29-June 4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Crisis Therapy; *Helping Relationship; Interaction Process Analysis; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Intervention; Language Variation; *Speech Communication

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THERAPEUTIC INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR IN THE CRISIS SITUATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF COPING RESPONSES *

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Presented to the Health Communication Division
of the International Communication Association
for the 1977 Convention

CS 501 816

* The authors wish to thank Larry D. Miller for his critical review of this paper.

ABSTRACT

Research in crisis intervention has prescribed how trained but non-professional individuals should and do act in a crisis situation. The present study, however, focused on the types of responses untrained helpers use to respond to the crisis of another individual. Results indicate that types of responses vary significantly with probing and supportive modes of response used most often.

THERAPEUTIC INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR IN THE CRISIS SITUATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF COPING RESPONSES

The crisis situation necessitates a unique type of interpersonal relationship between the helper and helpee. Aguilera and Messich (1974, p. 1) describe the helpee in a crisis situation as follows:

> A person in crisis is at a turning point. He faces a problem that he cannot readily solve by using the coping mechanisms that have worked for him before. As a result his tension and anxiety increase and he becomes less able to find a solution. A person in this situation feels helpless--he is caught in a state of great emotional upset and feels unable to take action on his own to solve his problems.

The helper, preferably one who is "living effectively or at a minimum, more effectively than the helpee" (Carkhuff, 1969, p. xii), uses direct responses in an effort to cope with the individual in crisis.

Rationale

Recent research suggests how a helper ought to handle an interpersonal crisis situation (Carkhuff, 1969; Crowley and Ivey, 1975; and Wright, 1975), what coping skills can be taught to individuals (Carkhuff, 1970; Egan, 1975; and Ivey, 1972), the

need to instruct non-professional individuals in the area of helping skills (Aguilera and Messick, 1974; Ivey, 1974; and Shneidman, 1972), and the success of using non-professionals as counselors or helpers in crisis situations (Carkhuff, 1969; Bard and Berkowitz, 1969; Johnson, Hanson, and Rothaus, 1967; Kaplan, Boyajian, and Meltzer, 1970; Caplan, 1970; Guerney, 1969; and Schindler-Rainman, 1960). These studies included examination of the use of a variety of lay and paraprofessional helpers including nurses, teachers, students, mothers and police officers. The researchers provided crisis intervention training and then analyzed a subject's effectiveness in a crisis situation.

Crisis intervention, however, is practiced regularly by peers, family members, and acquaintances who do not have training. In fact, individuals in crisis typically turn to close friends and family members first. Dana, Heynen, and Burdetter (1974) found in a survey of college students that the most often used "counselor" is a close friend, while the campus psychological services were ranked last in the order of preferences for seeking help under crisis. Further, Gerber (1969) argues that when an individual seeks or accepts assistance from a practitioner who is not a customary source of help, it is a step away from normality and can heighten the crisis situation. The untrained helper's behavior in a crisis situation, however, is yet to be determined.

There is research then prescribing how trained but non-professional individuals should and do act in a crisis situation, but no investigation of how untrained individuals actually cope with and respond to the crisis of another person. The need for research designed to investigate the therapeutic behavior of untrained individuals in a crisis situation was articulated by Arnold (1973, p. 15):

> First, an individual needs and may require that other persons assist him in surmounting the crisis. These persons can be members of the immediate family, friends, or social workers. Second, facilitating communication between the individual and the helper mitigates the severity of the crisis. While both of these were conclusions drawn from literature, it would certainly be appropriate to test these in actual crisis situations. Particularly, further studies should be conducted on the role of communication in its facilitating dimension, as a reducer of crisis.

As such, the present study, an initial look at the behavior of untrained helpers, centered about the following two research questions:

1) In a crisis situation, do untrained helpers use different types of responses and, if so, what modes of response are predominantly used?
2) Is the mode of response used by an untrained helper in an interpersonal crisis situation affected by the sex of the helper and helpee?

Method

Sixteen male and eighteen female students enrolled in Interpersonal Communication during the Spring and Summer terms of 1976 participated as subjects. Each of the students was assigned to a male or female confederate in order to form dyads that fit into one of the following four "crisis" conditions: 1) male helpee (confederate) and male helper (subject); 2) male helpee (confederate) and female helper (subject); 3) female helpee (confederate) and male helper (subject); and 4) female helpee (confederate) and female helper (subject). The subject (helper) and confederate (helpee) were introduced, asked to participate in a ten minute prestudy project, and began asking each other questions from a dyadic interview form (see Appendix A). The crisis situation began when the male or female confederate, a trained actor or actress, answered the question, "Right now I'm feeling . . .?" At that point the helpee became emotionally distressed, explaining that they had just received a letter that day stating that they had failed a medical school entrance exam. Thus, the interpersonal crisis situation evolved about the helpee's feelings of disappointment and pressure at failing the exam, and, subsequently, the helper's responses to the individual in crisis during the ten minute interaction.

When the confederate initiated the crisis three raters viewed the interaction from behind a one-way mirror and categorized

each of the subjects' responses into one of six response type categories--understanding, probing, interpretive, supportive, evaluative, or diverting. In this way the verbal behavior of the helper was subjected to a content analysis to determine his ability to empathize with the helpee. Each of the raters, two males and one female, had extensive experience in various counseling roles. One of the researchers indicated when a response began and ended in order to insure that each of the raters was categorizing the same statement. A response began when the helper began talking and ended when he or she finished a statement or was interrupted by the helpee.

In order to determine interrater reliability on identifying each of these six categories, the raters were administered a revised form of the Helping Relationship Inventory (Jones, 1973) prior to the actual experiment. The instrument contains twenty-five items with each item including a "client" statement followed by five alternative helper responses. The raters were instructed to label each of the five responses with one of five categories. The interrater reliability coefficient for the three raters was .84.[1]

During the study, however, the raters were instructed to categorize each of the subjects' responses into one of six categories defined as follows: 1) probing--a response indicating that the subject's intent is to gather further information, provoke further discussion along a certain line (i.e. "Is there

any way you can find out what parts of the exam you missed?"); 2) understanding--a response indicating that the subject's intent is to respond by paraphrasing what he heard the other person saying, asking for clarification (i.e. "It sounds like it will be really hard to call your parents"); 3) supportive--a response indicating that the subject's intent is to reassure, to reduce the other person's intensity of feeling, to pacify (i.e. "I've known a lot of people who have taken it the first time and didn't make it either and took it again and made it"); 4) interpretive--a response indicating the subject's intent is to teach, to impart meaning, or to analyze the other person's position for him (i.e. "I can tell you want it so bad it's really a goal for you"); 5) evaluative--a response indicating that the subject has made a judgment of relative goodness, appropriateness, or rightness (i.e. "I wouldn't let the first blow destroy your whole world"); and 6) diverting--a response that does not deal directly with the issue, but instead attempts to change the topic, laugh it off, or simply ignore the interaction (i.e. "I guess we should answer the rest of these questions") (see Appendix B). The sixth category of response, diverting, was added to Jones' original subscale for the purpose of this study. The reliability coefficient for the three raters during the study was .80. (The above statements were taken as representative from several different dyadic interviews.)

Following the ten minute interaction, each of the subjects was interviewed by one of the researchers. The subject first rank ordered the six types of responses in terms of the mode of response they felt they predominantly used (one) to the mode of response least used (six). Further, the subject listed adjectives characterizing the climate of the interaction with the confederate (see Appendix C). An explanation of the study was then provided.

After converting each individual's raw score to a percentage based on their response, a two-way ANOVAR (analysis of variance for repeated measures) was used to analyze the data provided by the raters. The ANOVAR for types of responses determined, in respect to the first research question, that all categories of response types were used by the subjects, but certain types of responses were used during a crisis situation more readily than other modes of responses ($p < .01$) (Table 1).[2] Inspection of the mean scores revealed individuals predominantly used probing or supportive types of responses. The ANOVAR for the four condition groups was not significant enough to suggest that sex of helper or helpee affected the type of helping response (Table 1).[3]

Table 1 about here

Table 1

ANOVAR Between Conditions and Responses

Sources	df	F	Probability
Between SS			
GROUPS	3	1.055	.3836
ERROR	30		
Within SS			
TRIALS	5	41.411	.0000**
GROUPS X TRIALS	15	1.597	.0806***
ERROR	150		

**[F(5,80) = 41.411, p < .01]

***[F(15,80) = 1.597, p < .10]

Discussion

The results indicate that the modes of response used by untrained individuals in a crisis situation vary significantly. The variance in the types of responses appears to come from the difference between the predominantly used responses of supportive (441/1169 total rated responses) and probing (421/1169 total rated responses) as compared to evaluative (122/1169 total rated responses), diverting (78/1169 total rated responses), understanding (73/1169 total rated responses), and interpretive (34/1169 total rated responses). The subjects, in accord with the raters, perceived their coping responses as being mainly supportive and probing. Results of the rank ordering of helping responses by subjects following the study revealed that fifteen helpers rated supportive as the category of response most representative of their behavior during the interaction, while eight subjects rated probing as most representative. The raters perceived the untrained helpers as giving responses in the following order: supportive, probing, evaluative, diverting, understanding, and interpretive, while the subjects saw themselves as being mostly supportive then probing, understanding, evaluative, interpretive, and diverting. Professional counselors in a study by Jones (1967), however, reported that they prefer helping responses in the following order: understanding, probing, interpretive, supportive, and

evaluative. This particular analysis supports the conclusion that untrained helpers exhibit and recognize a particular type of behavior in a crisis situation, but this type of behavior is fairly dissimilar to the mode of responses preferred by professional helpers.

Though the interaction between types of responses and condition groups approached significance (Table 1), there is not conclusive evidence that sex of helper and helpee affected the helping response. A comparison of initial statements (first three responses made by each subject), however, revealed that generally females started by using probing statements and males generally started by using supportive statements. A power test indicated that more than twice the number of subjects (approximately 80) used in the present study would be needed to reach significant differences between the four groups.

During the debriefing sessions a small number of subjects indicated suspicions about the authenticity of the crisis due to the fact that a stranger was disclosing so much to them and, of course, because one-way mirrors were in the room. But regardless of suspicions, the subjects indicated on the questionnaire that they perceived a crisis in the encounter (30 out of 34 subjects characterized the climate of the interaction with such terms as tense, emotional, a breakdown and/or sad), while a number of the helpers indicated that they felt it necessary to react to the individual because even though they suspected this was

the actual study they were not certain enough to refuse help.

Much about the helping behavior of untrained individuals is still unknown. The present study supports the conclusion that certain types of responses are predominant in the coping behavior of untrained helpers, but future research could be used to more thoroughly investigate the influence of sex on coping responses, determine whether or not stages of helping responses exist, and assess the actual effectiveness of the untrained individual's helping behavior. Indeed, an interpersonal crisis situation necessitates a number of abilities on the part of the helper and, therefore, it is an area that should not be ignored by those who recognize the importance of therapeutic communication skills. Future research in this area may be used to verify or contradict present beliefs about effective helping behavior and, consequently, aid those lay or professional individuals who will be providing help through communication in a crisis situation.

Appendix A

Subjects' Prestudy Instructions

The actual experiment will be video taped and will begin in a few minutes. Before video taping this interview we would like for you to practice answering a few sample questions of each other. As you begin this practice session please read the directions and begin answering the questions orally. The research assistant will return in a few minutes.

This encounter experience is designed to facilitate getting to know another person. Each person responds to each statement before continuing. The discussion items are open-ended statements and can be completed at whatever level of self-disclosure one wishes.

1) My name is . . . .
2) My hometown is . . . .
3) My major is . . . .
4) When I'm with new people I usually . . . .
5) Right now I'm feeling . . . .
6) When I'm rejected I usually . . . .
7) The thing that turns me on most is . . . .
8) The thing that turns me off most is . . . .

Appendix B

Raters' Instructions

You are being asked to rate the types of responses given by subjects in a dyadic interview. You are to rate each response given by a subject in the interview according to the scale listed below.

A response is defined as a statement begun by the subject and ending when he pauses or is interrupted by the confederate. A response, therefore, may include more than one verbal sentence but will only receive one rating that seems most characteristic of the total response.

Rating of responses should begin when the confederate answers the third question on the Prestudy Interview sheet which reads: "Right now I'm feeling . . . ." This question will simulate a crisis response from the confederate who will exhibit tears. Begin rating with the subjects' response to that reaction.

Rate a response as PROBING (P) when:

the response indicates that the subject's intent is to gather further information, or provoke further discussion along a certain line. The subject in some ways implies that the other person ought to or might profitably develop or discuss a point further.

ex. "Have you talked with your prof about alternative assignments you might complete to make up for your low test grade?"

Rate a response as UNDERSTANDING (U) when:

the response indicates that the subject's intent is to respond by paraphrasing what he heard the other person saying and asking for clarification. This response would be typical of the Rogerian reflection of feeling approach.

ex. "You'll probably do much better on the next exam. I bet he won't weigh the first exam as much."

Rate a response as INTERPRETIVE (I) when:

the response indicates that the subject's intent is to teach, to impart meaning. Often times it is an attempt to analyze the other person's position for him.

ex. "It may not be the exam that's really bothering you but your indecision about whether or not you want to stay in pre-med as a career."

Rate a response as EVALUATIVE (E) when:

the response indicates that the subject has made a judgment of relative goodness, appropriateness, or rightness.

ex. "I think you're putting too much emphasis on one test. These results shouldn't affect your whole career plans."

Rate a response as DIVERTING (D) when:

the response does not deal directly with the issue but instead attempts to change the topic, laugh it off, or simply ignore the interaction.

ex. "Well, I think it would be better if we talked about something else for awhile."

APPENDIX C

The following is a transcript of a female-female dyad beginning at the point at which raters began coding the helper's verbal responses.

(h) indicates a helper response
(H) indicates a helpee response
( ) indicates a pause
/ / indicates that the tape recording was inaudible

(H) Right now I'm feeling ( ) like uh I feel awful

(h) You feel awful?

(H) Yea ( )

(h) How come?

(H) Well ( ) I just uh ( ) well I just graduated and I got a letter today saying I failed my medical exams / / I thought I was going to be done and I got my scores back today and they were even worse than the last time ( )

(h) You're kidding?

(H) I just feel terrible ( ) ya' know I feel I've just wasted several years of my life

(h) Oh yea ( ) I ( ) I'd feel down too

(H) I can't even believe it happened ( ) ya' know I have good grades ( ) it's just that I freak out when I take something like that test ( )

(h) Ah, don't worry about it ( ) can you take it again?

(H) I don't know what's the use ( )

(h) / /

(H) My father was a doctor and he ( ) I don't know I just always wanted to be a doctor too and he uh he ( ) he was really upset the first time I flunked these exams

(h) You had a lot of pressure ( )

(H) Oh / /

(h) Don't tell him you did worse though

(H) / /

(h) Well, I don't know what you expect those tests are big tests and I know a lot of kids who ( )

(H) But that's not the point ( ) I mean I don't get to go into a medical school if this keeps up ( ) if I can't pass the test they're not going to take me anywhere ( )

(h) Yea, but all you gotta do is keep trying

(H) Yea ( ) but / / this is getting ridiculous

(h) Well you know if you do end up passing it like say the next time will that have any bearing on where you get into school?

(H) Well, I think sometimes they consider it ( ) my grades are good but ( ) I have a 3.8

(h) A 3.8?

(H) Well you have to ( )

(h) Yea ( )

(H) Like I want to do well ( ) I hate myself ( ) like I went in to that test I can't believe it and looked at a question and ( )

(h) Drew a blank ( ) yes ( )

(H) I forgot ( ) it's just like all this pressure ( ) building up ( ) and I really care ( ) you know my father's a really wonderful doctor ( )

(h) Oh I don't know ( ) you probably feel really bad now but a week from now ( )

(H) I really feel awful

(h) I know, but you're not doing yourself a damn bit of good and you're takin' all the pressure

(H) My father's gonna kill me ( ) I have to call him and I'm really scared I don't know what to say to him

(h) Well if your dad doesn't understand I don't know how much of a father he is cuz I know my father would understand / / and I'll probably take the exam five times to pass the dumb thing ( ) it's hard ( ) those big tests are hard ( ) I'm amazed that people can do well on those at all.

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Footnotes

[1]The coefficient of reliability included in Holsti (1969) was used for interrater reliability. In the formula, C.R. $\frac{2M}{N_1+N_2}$, M is the number of coding decisions on which the two judges are in agreement, and N_1 and N_2 refer to the number of coding decisions made by judges 1 and 2, respectively.

[2]Though the ANOVAR does take into consideration the possibility that the types of responses are not independent of each other, the results are reported with the qualification that the modes of response are not necessarily independent.

[3]The ANOVAR for the main effects did not meet the confidence level set at .05, but the interaction between types of response and main effects approached significance (Table 1).